

HUMAN SERVICES AVAILABILITY AND DELIVERY IN A TRANSITIONAL ECONOMY

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This workshop reviewed significant policy changes and questions involving public education and other major human services including income maintenance, nutrition, and employment (safety net) programs.

POLICY ISSUES IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Three major issue sets are evident in policy debates surrounding primary and secondary education. Each of these issue sets contains a number of policy options for resolution. This presentation provides, as a basis for further discussion, the major issue sets and some primary policy options.

Unsatisfactory Performance of Public Schools

Numerous indicators highlight what many now consider the unsatisfactory performance of public schools in this country. Declining scores on Standard Achievement Tests (SAT) and College Boards as well as national assessments of low science achievement; the fact that 13 percent of 17-year-olds are functionally illiterate; and the rapid growth of remedial math courses in colleges are all performance indicators that have serious implications in a rapidly changing economy which has a high requirement for technical skills and adaptability (1).

The underlying causes, according to the Gardner Commission Report on excellence in education, are: The “cafeteria curricula” offered in many secondary schools in which it’s difficult to distinguish the “appetizers” and “desserts” from the “main courses”; low student expectations; and severe shortages of adequately trained and motivated teachers. According to the report, not enough able people are becoming teachers. Moreover, teacher preparation programs, it is suggested, need

improvement; teacher pay is generally too low; and severe teacher shortages exist in the subjects of math, science, foreign languages, teaching the gifted and talented, language minorities, and the handicapped.

Two policy options which address declining school performance are the simple and the modified voucher plans. In the former, a voucher of equal amount would be given to all families with school age children to be used to further their education. In the latter, larger grants would be given to poorer families and transportation to and from school would be subsidized.

Federally-financed teacher in-service training is a third policy option, one oriented toward improving the abilities of our teachers. Requirements for high school graduation could also be increased; college admission requirements could be increased; schools could be in session for longer periods each day and year; teacher salaries could be increased and based on performance as measured by student standard test scores, peer evaluation, and educational achievement. Careful study of each of these policy options is needed to distinguish the costs and benefits they would generate, the incidence of those impacts, and behavioral incentives created.

Reliance for Public Support on Local Property Tax

Nationwide about 50 percent of the total school budget of \$100 billion comes from the property tax. Direct federal aid is less than ten percent of the total budget and state aid only partially equalizes wealth differences among districts. Operational school costs differ in locales and non-school public expenses such as fire and police protection also differ. The property tax base per student differs and property tax tends to be regressive. Heavy reliance on the property tax is not a new issue, but interest in it intensifies as federal expenditures for human services decrease and states become less able to provide assistance to local school districts.

Some policy options include power equalization plans now being used in some states through which the state recaptures "excess" tax revenues; full state funding such as exists in Hawaii; additional federal assistance as an equalizer; substitution of new local taxes for property tax; and property tax reform such as circuit breakers, deferred payment, and differential treatment of property.

Financial Overburden on Families Using Private Schools

Use of private schools varies by state from less than ten percent to 30 percent. As the costs for private education have risen, some have termed the financial responsibility assumed by users of private schools an overburden. Policy options to reduce the burden include a voucher plan and tuition tax credits, the latter which already exists in Hawaii, New York, California, and Minnesota.

Conclusion

Policy educators specializing in education issues have a difficult task. Knowledge about the underlying production functions for education is incomplete. The issues are charged with emotions. Yet, a crucial role for the educator/researcher exists. Policy educators can better equip decision makers by reviewing what is settled and unsettled about how education is produced, and by providing positive and normative knowledge which will allow decision makers to achieve the results they desire and expect.

REFERENCES

- (1) Gardner, David Pierpont. *A Nation at Risk*. Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983.